

# Letters from Kenya: SJ native one of 1,500 to get writing scholarship



Photo provided

**St. Joseph native Anna Clark is one of only 1,500 nationally to receive Fulbright Fellowship, which will allow her to work on her own writing and to teach creative writing to young people in Kenya.**

**Anna Clark to travel to east African nation to teach and work on her own projects**

**By JOHN MATUSZAK**  
Assistant Local News Editor

**ST. JOSEPH**—St. Joseph native and freelance journalist Anna Clark has never been afraid to seek out new experiences or to take chances.

Inspired by the Nancy Drew books, she conceived her own mystery series,

wrote the stories and sent them to publishers – at the age of 10.

“It was a miracle that my parents and teachers didn’t laugh” at her attempts at publication but instead encouraged her, Clark said. Her dad even typed her manuscript at work.

The subsequent rejections didn’t deter her from pursuing her future career as a writer.

And so it was no great surprise that Clark, 30, the daughter of Pat and Patti Clark of St. Joseph, decided to apply for one of the country’s most prestigious schol-

arship programs.

Clark has been awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to work on her own writing and to teach creative writing to young people in Kenya. She leaves in January and will be one of 1,500 U.S. citizens working in 155 countries under the program operated through the U.S. State Department.

Since the program was founded in 1946, 40 Fulbright alumni have won Nobel prizes and 75 have received Pulitzers.

Clark will be one of only four selected to work in Kenya out of 66 who applied.

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The Detroit resident credits her optimism and the support of her family and colleagues for allowing her to pursue new horizons.

Growing up, she spent a lot of time at the local library and even cried when it closed for remodeling.

At St. Joseph High School she worked on the student news magazine, ran cross country and performed in musical theater productions “even though I can’t sing. It gave me the confidence to cross imaginary lines and to take risks.”

She also enjoyed being outdoors and walking along

the lakeshore, something she took for granted at the time but came to miss when she moved away.

At the University of Michigan she discovered the writer Isak Dinesen, best known for “Out of Africa,” the classic chronicle of her time on a coffee plantation in Kenya.

“It drew my attention to this place in the world,” said Clark, who was also inspired by Dinesen’s lesser-known Gothic tales.

Clark has since created a literary blog site,

Please see **CLARK**, page A6

## CLARK

► Continued from page A1

Isak typed.com, named for this “unfortunately underrated writer.”

With bachelor’s and master’s degrees in creative writing (and an undergraduate minor in criminal justice), Clark taught writing under the Prison Creative Arts Project and headed the Portfolio Project, which connected inmates with mentors who helped them to collect their best work.

After earning her degrees, she returned to Southwest Michigan briefly and was a freelance writer for The Herald-Palladium from June 2004 until moving to Boston

the following January.

Her favorite project was a series titled “What’s On Your Mind” leading up to the fall elections, in which she sought out the opinions of people in the area. “It was a great opportunity to rediscover the area ... (and) to seek out different voices.”

She spent three years in Boston, but it was never home. “I was very fond of Boston but I never fell in love with it.”

She came back to Michigan and settled in Detroit, which she described as “a city in the making” with a vibrant cultural life. As a prolific fiction writer and journalist, she has had her work featured in Salon.com, The Nation, Ume Reader

and ESPN magazine, among many others. Clark also is a 2010 Fellow with the Peter Jennings Project for Journalists and the Constitution.

But even in an exciting city in transition such as Detroit, Clark eventually found herself “feeling personally dried up creatively.”

That’s when she decided to apply for the Fulbright Fellowship in 2009.

“Kenya is a place I had been meaning to go to for a long time,” Clark said. “Sub-Saharan Africa is emerging in its literature and culture. Kenya is such a young nation, and has been in existence not even 50 years, and it’s demographically young.”

She learned that she had

made the first cut in January of this year. In June, she received final notice.

One part of her project will have her working with students at the University of Nairobi’s Department of Literature.

A second workshop will have her working through Kwani Trust, the literary organization founded by writer Binyavanga Wainaina for Nairobi youth.

This project will focus on current events, examining how Kenyans are viewed in the media and how the young people see themselves.

“As Kenya nears its fifth anniversary of independence in 2013, young people deserve a place to speak for

themselves,” Clark wrote on her blog.

A third workshop will be through The Imagine Company. Clark is looking at creating a workshop for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth.

She reports on her blog that Emmo Oputi, editorial director of The Imagine Company, told her that in a country of 40 million people he estimates that only five blogs are hosted by openly gay Kenyans.

While Clark says she has a lot of ideas, she is also approaching her assignment humbly and with a willingness to learn.

To prepare, she has been doing a lot of reading, is learning Swahili and is mak-

ing connections with people she will meet in Kenya.

In addition to stimulating her own writing, Clark also is hoping to serve as a kind of cultural ambassador and to bring back an understanding of a continent and a country about which many in the United States have little knowledge of.

At her family’s Christmas party, which will also serve as a going-away party, Clark will be handing out fact sheets about Kenya.

While in Kenya, she will be writing a series of articles to be published in the Detroit News. “I have a lot to discover, and I’m looking forward to sharing what I discover.”

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